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ABSTRACT

This document contains three papers on action learning. "Action Learning: Case Studies of Most Valued Learning and Application" (Suzanne D. Butterfield) reports on a qualitative study in which longitudinal data was collected from document analysis and first-line consulting managers who had participated in action learning. The study established that the most prevalent types of action learning and application focused on provocative questioning to solve problems, coach and counsel for performance improvement, and accomplish work in general. "Mapping Group Dynamics in an Action Learning Experience: The Global Team Process Questionnaire (GTPQ)" (Robert L. Dilworth) discusses Virginia Commonwealth University's use of the GTPQ to map group dynamics in action learning sets and thereby clarify how action learning is viewed by learners and how group dynamics within teams dedicated to action learning unfolds. "Comparing the Learner's and Educator's Perspective on Conditions That Foster Transformative Learning in Action Learning Programs" (Judy O'Neil, Sharon Lamm) examines the results of two action learning studies to identify differences between learner/participant and educator/learning coach perspectives regarding the individual, program, and organizational conditions that foster transformative learning. All three papers include substantial bibliographies. (MN)

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Action Learning

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Action Learning: Case Studies of Most Valued Learning and Application

Suzanne D. Butterfield
Brenau University

The purpose of this qualitative study was to document what action learners believed to be their most valued learning and application. Longitudinal data were collected from document analysis and first-line consulting managers who participated in an action learning experience. The most prevalent learning and application focused on provocative questioning to solve problems, coach and counsel for performance improvement, and accomplish work in general.

Keywords: Action learning, Transfer of Learning, Management Development

Concern about the transfer of formal training among HRD professionals is not new. In 1988, Baldwin and Ford reported that not more than 10% of training expenditures result in transfer of training to the job. Since then, several reports have been published regarding the demise of training transfer even as formal organizational training budgets have increased (Gordon, 1998). One way to promote learning and its application is to incorporate elements of actual work experiences into the learning experience. Action learning does this while simultaneously developing fundamental thinking and learning strategies that can be employed as a natural way to conduct oneself, not just in one specific effort.

Several problems arise, however, in an action learning experience. The first is its learning and application are difficult to observe and measure. The second is that human resource developers cannot predetermine or control new thinking strategies, so learning objectives are difficult to identify and design into the training. Extensive time and effort might elapse before linkage is realized among action learning and individual, group, and organizational development. As a result, action learning may be easily discounted even though it has been seen as a bridge to link learning, professional development, systems thinking, and performance outcomes.

Theoretical Framework

Action Learning. The theoretical framework for this study is action learning as proferred by Reginald Revans (1981, 1982). This was chosen as the theoretical framework for this study instead of other models because it is considered seminal work in the field. Revans proposed that learning is a function of conventional knowledge, insightful questioning, and experimentation. The basis for his propositions is that people learn best while trying to resolve an unfamiliar, intractable problem; and that people learn best while interacting with co-learners. Learning occurs from direct engagement upon the learner's existing problem versus being directed by others to participate in training or receiving instruction about some distant construct. Other educators have reiterated that adults are more interested and motivated to learn about something to which they can relate and about which they can do something (Marsick, 1987; Marsick, 1991) --hence, the learner's problem rooted in the workplace.

Furthermore, learning occurs collaboratively in a learning group that meets on a regular basis over an extended period of time. Co-learners bring a range of insight and experience to problem resolution, individual introspection, individual learning, *and* social construction of meaning and knowledge. What makes action learning unique is its reliance on questioning insight. Insightful questions are those questions, of self and to others, that reexamine underlying assumptions, creativity, breakthrough thinking, and experimentation.

Other types of learning that have been identified from an action learning experience are systems thinking (global operations perspective), processing (conflict management, building trust, teamwork), and communication skills (ARL™, 1996). Marsick (1987) found that an action learning experience impacted action learners' abilities to expand their perspectives and frames of reference, to redefine problems, actively experiment, and critically reflect. Systems thinking (global operations perspective), processing (conflict management, building trust, teamwork), and communication skills have been significant outcomes from such an experience (ARL™, 1996). An action learning experience can impact learners' abilities to expand their perspectives and frames of reference, to redefine problems, actively experiment, and critically reflect (Marsick, 1987). Butterfield, Gold, and Willis (1998) found that action

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learning had to become "a way of personal way to life--almost a value before it could be effectively translated to the workplace according to a majority of the participants" (p. 495). These results showed a "new awareness of the impact of reactions and interaction, assumptions, ethics, and the liberation from canned or programmed viewpoints and problem solving (p. 494). These same participants believed that they could immediately create informal action learning environments within their work groups without having the structure of a formalized action learning group process. These studies have generally shown that action learning is a learning strategy that can be used when rapid changes in the organization adversely affect the applicability of and the learning from traditional training with predefined outcomes. Action learners are more likely to develop the personal strength and thinking strategies to continuously question their own and others' perspectives and what they think they know. This results in continuous, self-directed informal learning.

Qualitative Case Study Methodology

A qualitative case study is an appropriate methodology to study what individuals learn in action learning and how they apply this learning (Balog, 1995; Stake, 1994; Yin, 1989). This better captures the participants' perceptions as they are constructed over time in their own and in rapidly changing environments. The case study methodology allowed these participants to surface issues important to them--it was exploratory and emergent in nature (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The research questions in this study were:

1. What do action learners believe to be their most valuable learning in an action learning experience and why was this important to them?
2. Across cases, what appears to be the most prevalent learning and application as a result of the action learning experiences?

Sample. This was a purposive sample composed of first-line managers drawn from multiple action learning groups. Each participant was a case. The participants' worked for the same employer--a multinational professional services firm rooted in providing tax, accounting, and management consulting services. The firm delivers a variety of services to clients to solve critical problems by implementing highly valued changes in their business strategies and operations. The participants had been in their current positions less than two years, although most of them had several years of consulting experience. They typically provided advisory or system implementation services to clients external to their own organizations. When first promoted, these managers typically manage consultants or senior consultants on a project; however, they may also perform in individual contributor roles.

The action learning groups were part of a management development program--the purpose of which was to improve management and project performance, management retention, and client relationships. This specific study was initially undertaken to determine the effectiveness of using action learning as a management development intervention. The program started with a two-day kickoff which communicated that the participants were going to learn through a problem challenge, define their role in creating value, build capacity for managerial judgment, and improve tactical leadership skills while they worked toward personal development goals. The kickoff commenced with executive presentations about leadership. The program leader then conducted general team building exercises, orientation to action learning as the developmental methodology, and mock action learning groups with company executives acting as problem owners.

Each action learning group had a learning coach, at least five colearners, with each colearners having a different background, developmental goals, problems, and client engagements. The groups met separately once a month for an entire day during the next three consecutive months. Each participant had dedicated airtime within which he or she presented the problem and the action already taken to resolve it. Colearners engaged in questioning to help the problem owner think about the problem differently and make progress toward problem resolution. Providing advice to the problem owner was discouraged. At the end of the third workshop, each group presented their findings and learnings to a group of company executives. Executive presentations of this type are considered to enhance participants' learning (Dilworth & Willis, 1997).

Data Collection and Analysis. The principal method of data collection in this study was audio taped telephone interviews with the participants and with the management development program leader. Telephone interviews were the best and most expeditious method of collecting data because the participants worked at client sites throughout the United States. There were 22 participants selected for the study. These 22 attended the kickoff and at least two of the workshops. Approximately four months after the end of the program, data were collected from 17 of the 22. The interviews focused on the individual's learning and its application in the workplace and the

workshop. I analyzed interview transcripts for key ideas, critical incidents, key participant comments, discrepancies in responses, and reactions to questions that related to learning and application. I noted patterns or themes within each case and identified codes to represent them. These were categorized, defined, and labeled with properties and dimensions of frequency, degree, or intensity. The constant comparative analysis was used to search for statements or other indications of recurring behavior or events related to the research issues (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). I then generalized patterns across cases. One year after the first interview, I conducted a follow-up telephone interview with 10 of the 17. These 10 are later referred to as the "core" participants. The purpose of these interviews was to investigate what the participants believed to be key learning from their action learning experience after a longer period of time and how they had used action learning or other acquired knowledge. These interviews provided the opportunity to study the sustainability of action learning and its application. After these interviews, I conducted another transcript data analysis.

I also reviewed several documents relating to the company and the action learning module of the program. These documents included web site material; correspondence from the program leader to executive management regarding the program, research, results, action learning orientation material, and post-program feedback from the participants' and directors about the participants' behaviors and results. Three research associates examined some of the interview transcripts to provide independent analysis as a cross check to my own findings. Consequently, this study's internal validity was substantiated by the use of multiple methods of data collection such as questionnaires from a pilot study, interviews of participants and key informants, document review, the directly-related previous research in action learning, and the associates' analyses to develop "converging lines of inquiry" (Yin, 1989, p. 97) for triangulation purposes.

Limitations. One potential limitation that I, as the human-as-instrument, was continually concerned about was the influence of my own experience and expertise. The research associates provided a cross-check to my findings. To overcome the potential limitation of the small number of participants in this study, I compared their data to the data from my original research in which two other research associates also coded and analyzed the data. Another limitation was that these were telephone interviews. Face-to-face interviews might produce richer results if the researcher could address perceived discrepancies between verbal and non-verbal responses. In this case, I rechecked responses when I noticed changes in the participant's voice. I also reviewed the data more carefully when I listened to the audio tape after the interview if I noticed hesitancy or change of the participant's tone of voice or pattern of speech. To overcome the potential limitation of the self-report, I triangulated the data across cases and document review of data from participants' surveys immediately after the program and survey data from their managers.

Results and findings

In the first interviews, all of the participants were able to explicate what they did or did not learn. At the beginning of the reinterviews of the core group, most of the participants could not recall the action learning process. It appeared that the participants thought of action learning only as a formal group process they were meant to experience in the workshop--a technique. Consequently, they initially believed they either had not learned or had not applied the process. At some point during their reinterviews, all of the core group participants eventually identified either what they had learned or applied, or both as a result of their action learning experiences.

Questioning. The most prevalent learning occurred in how to engage in thought-provoking questioning--100% of the core group and 94% of all participants. The most valued learning of questioning was also the construct most applied. Almost all of the participants either learned or reinforced various skill levels of questioning. Half of the core group members (and nearly half of all participants) recognized that they had improved or reinforced their questioning skills. Others stated that the action learning process helped them improve the effectiveness of their questioning by prompting them to be more intentional, systematic, cogent, or generally more competent. Some of them felt that the questioning helped them determine solutions more quickly than if they had not engaged in it. Several participants cited the specific questions they learned or used to question others or themselves. The most cited questions were practiced in the action learning groups. Most of these questions are also fully anchored to action learning in the existing related literature. They were: "What would happen (if you tried…)?" "Now what?" "So what?" "Who cares and why do they care?" "What is getting in my way (of solving the problem)?" "Have you thought about…?" Generally, the participants felt the action learning questioning strategy was a way for them to think about their situations differently. They were not supposed to ask closed-ended questions. Instead they were

expected to ask "the questions that went beyond the yes and no." The participants interpreted the purpose of the questions as helping them to "generate their own ideas."

The participants viewed action learning predominantly as a questioning technique. Three of the participants from the core group, however, described, either directly or indirectly, action learning as a way of thinking instead of being just a technique. All of the participants who indicated they learned new questioning approaches (16 of 17) engaged in it in the workplace less formally and more spontaneously than in the learning group. They tended to use questioning in their team or client committee meetings or in one-on-one settings. No participants indicated use of it in the formal sense of having designated airtime for questioning of the problem owner, reflection to think about what transpired during the questioning, or discussion of what was learned. Half of the core group participants indicated they engaged in questioning more cogently, systematically, or intentionally. The following is a discussion of how they reported using questioning.

Problem Solving. The most prevalent use of the questioning was to solve problems. The entire core group and nearly all 17 of the participants reported they used questioning to solve problems. This is not surprising because in action learning the problem is intentionally the mechanism by which learning occurs. Having a problem was a condition of participation in the management development program. Most of the participants, whether in a leadership or individual contributor role, felt they could engage in questioning with their team members to solve problems. Some recognized that using questioning helped them get through the emotions of a situation to directly address the root causes of problems. Two of the participants reported they probably would have resolved problems with others using their traditional methods; however, they recognized that the people with whom they were working seemed to enjoy the process more with the questioning approach. Five of the core group members engaged the client in questioning. Of these, three used it to enable the client to solve their own problems. The participants, however, appeared to be selective about when they engaged in questioning with the client. Some were concerned about the client's perceived value of their (expert) service if they performed in a less directive manner. All of them used it to investigate client expectations, perspectives, and project-specific information.

Coaching and Counseling for Performance Improvement. Almost three quarters of both the core and the total group indicated that using supportive questioning was more effective, collaborative, and developmental than providing advice or answers to improve subordinates' work performance. Two participants realized the value of using questioning to keep responsibility for solving a problem with the team member working an issue.
Related to this, a few of the participants recounted a sense of personal relief that the questioning freed them from always having to have just the right answer in a given situation. Three participants had opportunities to counsel poor performers in their work groups during the year between interviews. Two of them felt they experienced better results by integrating a questioning approach in the discussion.

Accomplishing Work. Approximately three quarters of the participants in the core and the total group indicated they used varying degrees of thought-provoking questions specifically to accomplish work. They reported they used questions primarily to 1) define project scope of work and related staff roles, 2) define and investigate environmental influences affecting project execution; solicit stakeholders' or team members' expectations, perspectives, or motives; or 3) assess risk. Some of these participants expressed concern about using the questioning with individuals who were not familiar with the process. Four participants indicated they learned to enable team members to solve their own problems and grow professionally. They learned that they could achieve this through questioning.

Self-Questioning. Well over half of both the core and total groups engaged in questioning themselves for various purposes, most of which fall under the category of "thinking through the process." More specifically, they engaged in self-questioning to identify key project stakeholders, needed or potential actions and related steps, and project goals. A few of the participants questioned themselves to determine how they were performing some action or in evaluating their own or others' experiences in both work and non-work situations. Few participants reported that they consciously engaged in self-questioning to discover their assumptions, preexisting theories, and feelings about their situations. The majority of the participants did not appear to engage in self-questioning to identify their assumptions or in questioning others about their assumptions or espoused theories. This would have been more representative of insightful questioning, a step beyond the prevailing thought-provoking questioning. This fact uncovers a large "personal growth area" which might be addressed by action learning designers and researchers in the future.

In general, there did not appear to be consistent application of the questioning over time. Five of the core group members admitted to or indicated varying degrees of relapse. Several contextual reasons were indicated for this relapse (i.e. compressed project schedules, time pressures, inordinate amount of work, mindset or expectations to be the expert, the role of expert/individual contributor instead of as a group or project leader, lack of management support and reinforcement, lack of consistent internal management and lack of consistent management with knowledge of action learning principles, lack of a safe group in which to engage in mutual learning, and the judging environment of the firm wherein they did not want to appear to be anything other than an expert).

From the document review, I found that the program leader reported generally positive results from the management development program. At the end of the program, program participants, on the average, said the program met their expectations (35%--more than expected, 60%--close to meeting expectations). The program participants who had been managers for less than six months experienced the most broadening or changing of their understanding about their perception of a managerial role. Eighty-five per cent of the total number of program participants reported that their understanding of their potential impact on business in a managerial role was broadened during the program and 35% in a highly significant way. Most of them thought the learning format helped them develop "translate that thinking into action." The workshop helped them to think differently about learning and relating it to experience. The results of this review indicated that many of the total number of program participants' expectations were met or exceeded in a number of ways. The first was obviously in the area of problem solving. Almost three quarters of them needed development in the area of identifying, discussing, and resolving problems, and they achieved it. The next two most needed areas for development with the highest achievement level were handling issues with teams and clients and preparing others to be successful. The fourth most needed area for development with high achievement noted was in preparing others to be successful. In general, the results generated within the organization were consistent with the findings derived from the interviews. Most of the participants made improvements in their tactical leadership and project execution skills. A few of them developed a holistic and enabling paradigm of thinking rooted in challenging themselves and supportively questioning others. Furthermore, the participants and their managers acknowledged the environmental constructs of time pressures and client intolerance as limitations to learning and application. Finally, the results of this study were consistent with a pilot study (Butterfield et al, 1998). The participants in both studies generally experienced that:

1. The process of action learning, primarily questioning, is a powerful way to solve problems--accomplish work.
2. Action learners can immediately apply the principles of action learning informally--more one-on-one instead of the formal group process.
3. Focus on immediate results, expertise, and experience inhibits learning and its application.
4. Action learners can internalize questioning as a value--a personal and holistic way of thinking.

Summary of the findings. The predominant learning and use of action learning by the participants in this study was the practice of provocative (thought provoking) questioning. Approximately one-fourth of all participants proceeded to the depth of insightful questioning. Some participants did ask themselves and each other questions designed to clarify, examine, probe, discriminate, interpret and integrate elements of the situation, but others were somewhat less able to do so. It was difficult and mostly uncomfortable for the participants to make and sustain the switch from providing advice and counsel to insightful questioning. Most of the participants continued to rely on experience or expertise (their own or others' expectations) to some extent. Many of them engaged in questioning of a suggestive nature that appeared to be another way of recommending something from the questioner's experience. I especially interpreted such questions such as being of the "leading" kind. These often appeared to be veiled suggestions and cues to the answer that the questioner wanted considered. These types of questions and reliance on others' experience can act as barriers to learning, to generating one's own solutions, and to generating solutions grounded in the context from which the problem arises. By engaging in at least the level of provocative questioning, many of the participants expanded their perspectives, redefined problems, actively experimented, reflected and either resolved or made progress toward resolution of their problems. For some of the participants, the shift to asking insightful questions seemed to be hampered by the use of the familiar problem instead of the unfamiliar problem, unquestioned reliance on experience and expertise, or the expert role mindset. The facilitative-oriented managers (process consultants) may have a built-in advantage. They tended to engage in what seemed to resemble insightful questioning to induce others and themselves to think differently about their situations. It may be that their mindsets and expertise are grounded in consulting process rather than in subject matter. They typically perform their work without having specific expertise in the content of the client's problem.

Conclusions, recommendations, and implications for HRD research and practice

There appears to be two levels of questioning that can help the action learner view a dilemma differently. One level is the provocative question, the most predominant learning and application. The provocative question appears to induce people to adapt something known from their or others' experience to a current problem. The risk is making current decisions and solving current problems with assumptions rooted in a non-relevant context or with obsolete or limited information. Action learners can use provocative questioning to make some progress toward solving work and personal problems. They can also use questioning to coach, enable, and counsel others in their own and client organizations. By doing so, they can discover multiple ways of making progress on their problems. This type of questioning, however, does not induce individuals to identify their assumptions or preexisting personal theories that influence their ability to view their situations in different or new ways. The provocative question appears to limit the response to what is already known--it provides boundaries within which to answer the dilemma at hand.

The second level, the insightful question, allows action learners to experience more qualitative results because they tend to access and explore their own cognitive processes and assumptions and then evaluate the conditions of the relevant context. This type of questioning is more representative of systems thinking than the provocative question because the learner can examine diverse elements (and their interdependence) of the relevant context in more inclusive ways. They can subsequently derive entirely new solutions rooted in the problem's unique context in a real-time manner, considering the people and conditions of the relevant context instead of the people and conditions of a context not associated with the current problem. Insightful questions can result in action learners generating their own solutions instead of transferring cues from others or other experiences. Such action learners can recognize that individuals within the context have diverse ideas or perspectives about the relevant problem that could influence the course of action or provide a starting point from which to engage in further investigation. This leads to more developmental and innovative results than are likely to be derived from the provocative question. From a typical action learning experience, few will learn to engage in insightful questioning (of self and others) to the point that it becomes a natural way of thinking.

After a formal program, action learners tend to informally engage action learning instead of a formal group process with designated airtime. Such engagement can be in one-on-one dialogue, dialogue in meetings, or in very informal spontaneous interactions where they perceive a safe environment. This is very different from the formalized workshop setting where there was a specific process to follow including a finite airtime to discuss the problem, actions taken to date, questions from colearners, and discussion of lessons learned. The change in operationalizing action learning less formally as these participants did should not be construed as relapse or decay. In action learning groups in the United States, colearners typically experience a formal sequential technique that includes questioning. However, Revans, himself, has not prescribed finite and sequential steps for the action learners. He does not espouse learning a sequential technique. He focuses on building capability for the future. Learning and performance (in this case, application) is highly individualized based on the learners' current and future needs, the problem under study, and the relevant contexts. Consequently, the participants learned the technique, but did not apply it. They experienced more meaningful learning that they subsequently applied by translating the results of the technique. This required a longer period of time for cognition and application purposes. Additionally, the program designer (the HR developer) was far removed from the informal learning and application that occurred after the completion of the formal action learning experience.

Finally, learning and application cannot be adequately designed into the experience and appraised by evaluating just one or two of the elements of action learning. The systemic nature of action learning illustrates the intricacy and inter-relatedness of learning, action, accountability, responsibility, and characteristics of the learner, program design, and the context. Evaluating just one or two constructs would not present the full extent of learning or its application.

The conclusions drawn have implications for the theory and practice of action learning. These data add longitudinal insight to the existing research base. These data also highlight that building the capacity for learning needs time to develop; therefore, it is typically not measurable in the short term such as a three-month program. The participants needed more than the three learning group workshops; further support from their managers; and relief from work pressures to focus on, reinforce, and extend their learning. Continued management and HRD involvement need to be designed into the formal action learning experience. This is particularly true when action learners will typically use their learning in an informal and spontaneous fashion instead of in a formalized workshop setting--this informal use of action learning is not as visible. The intent of action learning is for the action learner to use an immediate problem as the learning mechanism in the present. However, the long-term focus of action learning is to develop new ways of thinking so that individuals can address future problems in qualitatively different ways. Therefore, time is needed for the HRD practitioner to evaluate the effectiveness of action learning--

effectiveness cannot be validated in the short term. HRD practitioners need to provide safe haven for communities of learning. The safe haven provides opportunities to experiment with and extend new learning, new techniques, new performance strategies, and thought processes without fear of career limitation from executive management, clients, peers, or the self. These communities can focus on learning that is both immediately applicable and strategic.

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Mapping Group Dynamics in an Action Learning Experience: The Global Team Process Questionnaire (GTPQ)

Robert L. Dilworth
Virginia Commonwealth University

Action learning is increasingly used for developing teams, "jump starting" organizational learning, promoting leadership development and transforming an organization's culture. However, there is little research about how action learning is viewed by learners and how the group dynamics within teams dedicated to action learning unfold. Virginia Commonwealth University has given the evaluative area of action learning concentrated address. VCU used a modified version of the Global Team Process Questionnaire to map group dynamics in action learning sets.

Keywords: Action Learning, Evaluation, Higher Education

For the past five years, the Adult Education and Human Resource Development Master's Degree Program at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) has been striving to build evaluation techniques specific to the action learning experience. Action learning has become an important part of curriculum design. Dilworth (2000) reported on action learning programs at six universities, including two outside the United States. At VCU, students in the aforementioned Master's Degree Program are encouraged to think deeply about their experience in dealing with a complex, real-world problem that they are asked to solve as part of the capstone course in the program. The students do this as part of an "action learning set" of four to six members. They are asked to keep "learning journals". At the end of their semester-long experience, "students submit an extensive individual report on the action learning process, group dynamics and personal lessons learned" (p. 529).

Why is action learning different than a usual team related undertaking? VCU uses core principles of action learning in its program that are found in varying degrees in most other action learning programs.

The problem to be addressed by the set (or team) is real and in great need of address. It is not fabricated in any way.

1. While it is expected that a solution to the problem can be developed and acted upon, the larger yield is learning itself. The real problem becomes the fulcrum on which critically reflective learning processes occur. The goal from a human resource development standpoint is to develop people who are capable of leading, problem solving, working effectively in teams, and thinking critically in building the long-term strategic capabilities of the organization.
2. Action learning must lead to action (Marquardt, 1999). "Merely producing reports and recommendations for someone else to implement results in diminished commitment, effectiveness, and learning. . ." (p. 33)
3. Emphasis is on questioning inquiry (the "Q" in the parlance of Reg Revans) as opposed to excessive dependency on "P", standing for programmed instruction (Revans, 1983, p. 11). Revans argues that in a rapidly changing environment we should begin with the "Q" (what is happening, what ought to be happening, and how do you make it happen?).
4. The set has no assigned leader and customarily operates as a self-directed work team with responsibilities shared.
5. Emphasis can be on moving learners away from what they already know, assigning them to work on problems that no one in the set has any great familiarity with. This can lead to fresh questions (the "Q" factor) and a re-examination of basic underlying assumptions. In this format, members of the action learning set are usually assigned a common problem to deal with. In other approaches, the individual set members may have individual problems they work on that are taken from their respective workplaces. In the latter case, the problem will probably only be familiar to the set member studying that issue (unless an entire natural team is committed to problem solution), thus creating an environment conducive to questioning inquiry.

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Problem Statement

There needs to be greater attention given to the evaluation of learning that is taking place, as well as group dynamics, in an action learning experience. This is not an area that is well covered, in part because the focus can center on task accomplishment versus learning. Action learning also has many variations in application, and determining how best to evaluate group dynamics and learning across action learning experiences can be problematic.

Theoretical Construct

Action learning traces its origins to action research and Kurt Lewin (Weisbord, 1987).

Lewin intended his enhanced problem solving model to preserve democratic values, build commitment to act, and motivate learning—all at once. Indeed some people have renamed the process action learning to more accurately indicate its nature (p. 87).

The work of Reg Revans over the years has given primary shape to action learning, including refinement of the dimensions inherent in the process (Revans, 1983, 1982, 1980). Those dimensions are highlighted in the introduction to this paper.

Action learning is increasingly finding its way into corporations, often as part of their corporate university. Rather than simply send high potential managers to external executive education programs, these organizations are developing focused large-scale customized action learning programs with measurable results. (Meister, 1998, p. 15) The Global Team Process Questionnaire (GTPQ) was created by ITAP International of Princeton, New Jersey, an organization doing wide-ranging consultancy with corporations world-wide. The fact that the GTPQ is indexed to the global arena makes it doubly attractive as a vehicle for evaluating group dynamics in an action learning set, since sets can often have multi-cultural content. This is certainly true of corporations today, and it can also be true of the university setting. For example, the Adult Education and Human Resource Development Master's Degree Program of VCU partnered with the University of Salford in England in 1996 in organizing an action learning program for US, Canadian and Australian students. (Dilworth, 1996, 1997, 1998, 2000). Further, students in the VCU program in recent years have come from 17 nations.

The GTPQ is a well-established instrument in terms of wide application since its inception in 1993. It has been used extensively (over 30 administrations with global teams), with pharmaceutical companies as well as in the chemical, consumer products and information technology industries (Bing, 2000). Thoroughly tested in a variety of environments, specifically by peer reviews at the end of the process, results have shown that the team with the best level of process (as indicated by the GTPQ) was also rated as producing the highest quality results. The GTPQ is a diagnostic tool which measures process changes over time on global and distance teams. It has also been used for intact, local teams.

Research Questions

The research questions all stem from one overriding proposition, namely that you can evaluate group dynamics and learning processes in action learning sets. Evaluation of group dynamics in teams is not new. What is new is an attempt to map group dynamics and effectiveness of the learning process within an action learning experience in juxtaposition. The specific research questions are:

1. Can a modified version of the GTPQ be used in an academic setting to map group dynamics and effectiveness of learning in an action learning experience?
2. What can administration of the GTPQ tell us about the internal dynamics of an action learning set?
3. What barriers occur in an action learning experience that can stand in the way of the learning process?
4. What positives and negatives do the participants in the action learning experience ascribe to action learning?

Methodology and Research Design

In partnership with ITAP International, the GTPQ was modified to fit the academic setting and obtain information specific to the action learning experience. Most changes to baseline questions were minor (e.g., reference to class versus corporate setting).

The following specific questions were asked in the modified questionnaire. Where a slight adjustment has been made to fit the classroom setting, one asterisk appears. When the question is unique to the particular

experiment in evaluating action learning, a pound sign appears. All other questions listed are baseline questions used without modification. Respondents use a six level Likert Scale in assigning a value (favorable to unfavorable). In some questions, "6" is high and in other cases, "1" is high.

1. Within your team, please characterize the distribution of work among team members over the recent past (equal to unequal).
2. Have your skills and capabilities increased through participation in your team?
3. Do you have time for work on your team's activities?
4. Is the agenda of your team clear? (Clear vs. unclear)
5. Are the roles of the team members clear? (Clear vs. unclear)
6. How effective is the work of your team? (Effective vs. ineffective)
7. (*) Have you had the opportunity to inform others in the class of the work of your team? (No opportunity or need vs. provided a presentation to another group)
8. (*) Have you had the opportunity to learn of comments on your work team from others in the class (No vs. quite a bit)
9. (*) How do you rank the importance of your team to your own future career success? (Of central importance vs. of little or no importance)
10. (*) Is your future career success likely to be positively affected by the team's work? (My future career success will remain unchanged or degraded, to there is likely to be a positive benefit to my future career success)
11. Group communications (Excellent to poor)
12. Describe the level of trust on this team. (Strong to weak)
13. (#) Describe the level of support provided by client(s). (Highly supportive to not supportive)
14. (#) The degree of learning occurring in this course experience vs. other courses you have taken. (Much higher to much less)
15. (#) The extent to which you find this experience challenging vs. other learning experiences in an academic setting. (Much less challenging to much more challenging)
16. (#) How did you find operating in a virtual team environment (i.e., much of the interaction by Internet and telephone vs. a collocated team at a single site? [One action learning set dealt with a client team over 1,000 miles away]
17. Identify a barrier that stands in the way of your team's work.
    a) With respect to your contributions.
    b) With respect to internal team productivity.
    c) With respect to factors, outside the team's control. [These required open-ended response vs. Likert Scaling]
18. (#) List four positives and four negatives in priority order of your experience with action learning thus far. [Students provided open-ended entries]

Two action learning sets were involved in this experiment. One set of five consisted of four females and one male. The other set had three female members and one male member. Administration of the Honey-Mumford Learning Style Questionnaire (LSQ) helped determine the set to which a given student would be assigned. An effort was made to mix learning styles and backgrounds in arriving at action learning set composition.

The larger team was involved with a major examination of how professional development programs needed to be designed and promoted for 500 faculty and staff at a large local community college. The other team dealt with a major project for the corporate university of a major company based in the Mid-West. Their study centered on evaluating how to measure delivery of learning programs. They had on-site visits at the beginning and end of the project (February and April 2000), handling research and interaction with the client team via virtual means in the interval between visits.

Adding to the value of this experiment was the fact that earlier evaluation processes were left in place as the GTPQ was administered. Students kept their learning journals, served as a focus group in discussing their experience as it developed during the semester, submitted a 15 to 20 page end-of-semester essay providing an assessment of the action learning process and group dynamics, and submitted a five to seven page end-of-semester essay on their personal learning. Their personal learning was pegged to critical incidents criteria. (Dilworth, 1998)

The GTPQ was administered twice during the semester. The first administration was done after the team had been through a month of intensive effort and had a chance to develop some group cohesion. That became the baseline index. Three months later, the second administration occurred as the projects drew to a close. It was therefore possible to compare baseline results with the second administration of the GTPQ, do a gap analysis and map trends. This could in-turn be compared with the other evaluative processes used. Following each

administration, ITAP International determined qualitative results via computer analysis and recorded qualitative results.

The action learning sets were given a composite/matrix profile of the overall team averages and range for each question asked, together with individual team member scores for each question. Since all completed their questionnaires independently, there was no way of identifying who was responsible for a given score. The results showed relative alignment in some cases (all scores close to the same) and areas where there were significant perceptual disagreements within the set. This created a basis for meaningful discussions within the set in reviewing and "fine tuning" the group dynamics. It served to open up discussion in areas that might otherwise have been undiscussable.

Each action learning set saw the complete results of the other team as well as their own. Each set then served as a set of "consultants" to the other team in helping them sort through the findings, in determining what they meant and how the team needed to address the findings.

What limitations were there to the research? As with any such investigation, the mix of participants can heavily influence results, no matter how good the methodology or basic learning design (in this case action learning). However, the care in administration of the GTPQ and the forms of triangulation present (e.g., comparing narrative student comments in their essays to GTPQ results) did serve to create a means of interpreting the significance of the results.

Results and Findings

1. Qualitative comparison of GTPQ results with other evaluative reference points (essays) suggest strong congruence, and that is reasonably to be expected. Both record the same experience.
2. Team 2 started with a relatively low profile in terms of performance based on the GTPQ. It then surged based on results of the second GTPQ. Team 1 had a much stronger initial profile. It then slipped back somewhat based on the second administration of the GTPQ, but retained rather high marks across the board. When the second administration of the GTPQ is compared with the first for each team, it reveals the following trends across the question categories (Likert-based items).

	Improved	Diminished	Unchanged	
Team 1	04	11	01	
Team 2	14	01	01	

1. GTPQ results for both administrations reveal very strong positive ratings for both teams in the following categories:

a. Work distribution.
b. Use of time.
c. Team agenda clear.
d. Team member roles clear.
e. Team effectiveness.
f. Opportunity to inform others.
g. Opportunity to learn from others.
h. Future career success positively affected.
i. Trust.
j. Learning in the academic course vs. others.
k. Experience challenging vs. other classroom experiences.

2. The high quantitative results on the GTPQ are mirrored in the quantitative results generated by the usual faculty evaluation form used at the university to assess quality of instruction and the learning experience. Results were uniformly at a median level of 5 (on a Likert Scale, with 5 as the maximum rating). Student essays also reflect the very positive student evaluation of the experience.

3. When set profiles were examined they identified some disparities of view within a set/team. Deviations of two or more Likert ratings between set members in a given area demonstrated to the set that there were some potential problem points in group process. One example of this was when four of five members of a set rated quality of communications to be excellent, while one member rated this area low. Another area of divergence noted was related to time. Four found adequate time to work on the project and one did not. Such differences are important to know. They provide a basis for intervention strategies within the set itself to alleviate concerns and improve group process.

4. While students placed high value on the learning, they also cited barriers to the team's work. They were invariably time related. Some verbatim student comments were:

a. Family time is reduced.

b. Time: Balancing work and this project because of the time spent on the project. I feel as though I almost need to be "on leave" from work in order to do extensive research, meet with the client, prepare presentations, etc.

c. Trying to meet at a convenient place and time for all members (not a very big barrier though!)

d. Attendance and punctuality has marginally interfered with productivity, but may have undermined group process (e.g., communication and cohensiveness. . .).

5. What is shown below is a representative sampling of student comments re: the most positive and negative aspects of the action learning experience (Number 1 in the priority order, of four asked for)

Positives

- Good team cohesiveness
- People from different areas and backgrounds working together
- More camaraderie than traditional courses
- Group interaction
- Working with the team and coming from a variety of experience
- Communicating within loop—sharing concepts with all for new ideas
- It's good (to a degree) that we are unfamiliar with the client organization—fresh perspective
- Developing friendships with team members

Negatives

- Confusion as to which group member should answer questions when asked by the client
- Decision making can be a long process
- Difficult to coordinate logistics
- Stress
- Must rely on all members, i.e., have to wait when one or more are late
- Overwhelming, easy to lose confidence in project
- Having to coordinate with all even with minor issues
- The client didn't seem to embrace, by way of deep introspection, action learning
- Difficulty getting a real grasp on what is expected of our team (deliverables)

Conclusions and Recommendations

1. To use the GTPQ effectively requires that the team have time to form and coalesce before administration of the instrument. In an earlier pilot test by the researcher, the teams involved did not spend extended time together. Therefore, team members did not feel any real vesting in team performance. Further, there was no single project focus as was true in this action learning experience. In the action learning experience, the project work was tightly bounded by time. How well the group did played an important part in determining the individual student grades.

2. When used in situations such as the action learning experience, where the work tempo is intensive and success of the team depends on good group dynamics, the GTPQ seems a very powerful tool. It also provides a basis for the team to target on specific areas that can interrupt or impede team effectiveness. That allows the team itself to deal with such problems. Since problems have been made evident by the team members, themselves, through anonymous completion of the GTPQ, the issues are made authentic and legitimate. It is worth noting that when results are excellent, good performance can end up being further bolstered (reciprocal causation). If an external facilitator, on the other hand, were to identify problems to the group based on observations of group activity, that would not tend to carry as much weight. It would be group process as seen through the eyes of someone not a continuous part of that process, rather than the inner conscience of the group.

3. When the GTPQ is slightly modified and wedded to the action learning experience through use of some open-ended questions, it can be doubly useful in an action learning context. The members of the action learning set receive not only quantitative feedback in this case, but qualitative as well. What this suggests is that the GTPQ can be made even more effective and useful by including questions customized to the context involved. This can be especially useful in dealing with cross-cultural situations where an understanding of cultural nuance can be important.

4. To an indeterminate extent, the GTPQ itself served as an effective intervention, in that its administration caused members of the action learning sets to consider a number of areas that are critical to the effectiveness of any group/team (e.g., clarity of team member roles and the level of trust within the team).

5. Use of the GTPQ in this instance, since it was used in tandem with several other evaluative sources (i.e., two essays, professor observation, class as focus group and the usual faculty/course evaluation at the university), provided a means of triangulating the results.

6. In responding to those question areas unique to the classroom version of the GTPQ, students rated the action learning experience more challenging and of higher learning value than other university courses they had taken. In terms of challenge, one set assigned an average value of 5.4. The other set averaged 4.5 (with a Likert Scale rating of six being the maximum in this instance). In terms of learning compared with other courses, one set assigned an average value of 2 and the other 1.75 (the best Likert Scale rating being 1 in this case).

How this Research Contributes New Knowledge in HRD

1. It shows how a proven survey instrument can be further strengthened through customization and the addition of a qualitative component to go with the quantitative one.
2. The GTPQ seems to have particular utility in an action learning experience because it promotes critical reflection at both individual and group levels, allowing the group itself to determine how best to self-facilitate progress. It can also give an external facilitator a legitimate basis for helping a group work through its self-determined problem areas.
3. As the use of self-directed work teams broadens, with the need to have them truly self-direct their activities, an instrument like the GTPQ can be of great value. As indicated earlier, it can be of particular benefit in identifying areas of possible culture clash when cross-cultural teams are being used. Since some cultures are reluctant to discuss problems openly, this can be a means of getting areas of concern into the open for discussion.

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Comparing the Learner's and Educator's Perspective on Conditions that Foster Transformative Learning in Action Learning Programs

Judy O'Neil
Partners for the Learning Organization

Sharon Lamm
Inside<->Out Learning

This paper looks at the results of two action learning studies to compare the learner/participant perspective with the educator/learning coach perspective on what individual, program and organizational conditions foster transformative learning. The results show some agreement in the individual context; significant agreement in the program context; and little agreement in the organizational context, along with two areas of interest for Mezirow's work on transformative learning.

Keywords: Action Learning, Transformative Learning, Rational Discourse

Problem Statement

Action learning is said to help bring about transformative learning (Dilworth, 1996; O'Neil & Marsick, 1994; Pedler, 1996). Research has been done from the learner/participant perspective that describes what they experienced that brought about transformative learning (Lamm, 2000; Weinstein, 1995). Research has also been done that tells us what educators/learning coaches do to try to help bring about transformative learning (O'Neil, 1999). What we don't know is how the learning conditions that learners describe as fostering transformative learning compare with those conditions that learning coaches said they created to foster such learning. In other words, do learning coaches who espouse helping learners engage in critical reflection to lead towards transformative learning actually create situations that, from a learner's viewpoint, foster transformative learning? By having a better understanding of this phenomenon, human resource managers can improve the design of action learning programs and learning coaches can improve their practice.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of action learning originated with the work of Reg Revans in England in the 1940s (1989). We generally defined action learning as follows:

> "An approach to working with and developing people that uses work on an actual project or problem as the way to learn. Participants work in small groups to take action to solve their problem and learn how to learn from that action. Often a learning coach works with the group in order to help the members learn how to balance their work with the learning from that work" (Yorks, O'Neil & Marsick, 1999, p. 3).

Through an analysis of the different ways in which action learning is being practiced, O'Neil (1999) identified four 'schools' of action learning practice: the scientific school, the tacit school, the experiential school, and the critical reflection school. These 'schools' are based on the way in which practitioners view learning takes place in action learning. The school that is mo st pertinent to this paper is the critical reflection school. In the critical reflection school, practitioners believe participants need to go beyond problem solving to problem posing, and reflection on the basic premises that underlie their thinking. Mezirow (1991) refers to this kind of reflection as critical reflection. The explicit intention of fostering critical reflection is the primary differentiator of this school from the other schools.

Learning coaches who advocate the critical reflection school believe learning takes place through critical reflection and in their practice try to create situations in which this type of reflection would take place. The goals of this school are personal and organizational transformation (Yorks, O'Neil & Marsick, 1999).

> For the purpose of this paper, we use an adapted version of Mezirow's (1995) definition:
> Learning becomes transformative when a distorted, inauthentic, or otherwise unjustified assumption is replaced by a new or transformative point of view (meaning scheme) or habit of mind (meaning perspective) resulting in a more differentiated, complex, inclusive, reflective meaning structure as a guide to action (Lamm, 2000, pp. 222-223).

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Research Questions

1. Do the situations/conditions that learning coaches create with the intention of leading to transformative learning actually enable transformative learning from the perspective of participants?
2. Are there situations/conditions that learning coaches create with the intention of leading to transformative learning that participants don't identify?
3. Are there situations/conditions participants say bring about transformative learning that learning coaches don't explicitly identify?

Methodology

This study compares the results of two dissertation research studies—one that looked at transformative learning in action learning through the eyes of learners/participants and one that looked at action learning through the eyes of learning coaches (Lamm, 2000; O'Neil, 1999). The comparison was done via a content analysis (Weber, 1990) of the findings from both dissertations. The two researchers did the content analysis of the findings independently and the results were compared to help promote inter-rater reliability (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The dissertation that looked at transformative learning (Lamm, 2000) from the learners' eyes addressed whether and how leaders who participated in an action learning program experienced transformative learning, and which if any leadership behaviors were most likely influenced through participation in the program. This dissertation was a qualitative case study in one global corporate organization. The research sample included 24 learners, 24 co-workers who work with them, one key executive, and three action learning coaches. A number of data collection methods were used including: document analysis, pre-interview forms, learner, executive and learning coach interviews, learner leadership reflection forms, co-worker critical incident questionnaires, and Burke's (1992) self and co-worker leadership assessment inventory (LAI).

Transformative learning occurred in the areas of self-understanding, inclusiveness and reflective action. Also human qualities in leadership were enhanced, namely, empathy, humility, tolerance and patience. A model for cumulative transformations was developed. A complex interaction of individual, program and organizational conditions fostered a cumulative transformation process of multiple new awarenesses, verification/support, and practice. The after-program conditions were as important as stimuli that triggered transformative learning.

The dissertation that looked at transformative learning through the learning coaches' eyes (O'Neil, 1999) addressed what action learning coaches do and why they do it, and what they think is distinctive about their role in helping individuals learn from their experience. This dissertation was a modified phenomenological study of 23 learning coaches in the US, UK and Sweden. It used a variety of qualitative research techniques including "Self Q" interviews (Bougan, 1983), semi-structured interviews, and observations. The focus from the dissertation for this paper is on the view of those learning coaches who espoused helping learners engage in critical reflection towards transformative learning.

Key findings pertinent to this paper are that learning coaches who have a theoretical underpinning of how learning takes place in action learning and an internal, metaphorical view of their practice are more likely to have their espoused theory of practice match their theory-in-use. Second, learning coach interventions that are unique to action learning focus on creating situations which would promote and support learning, particularly learning that leads to critical reflection and possibly transformative learning.

The limitations that need to be acknowledged in looking at the findings from this study include the following:

- only the findings of those learning coaches who espoused using critical reflection to create transformative learning—a total of 8 out of 23—were used for the content analysis
- the study of learners was confined to one organization within one action learning program, while the learning coaches worked across a wide spectrum of academic and corporate organizations and action learning programs.
- learning coaches who did not work in the program studied by Lamm were included in O'Neil's learning coach sample.
- the original purpose of Lamm and O'Neil's study was not to compare learner and learning coach perspectives.

Results and Interpretations

There are a number of similarities in what the learners think are conditions that support their transformative learning and what situations learning coaches create to enable transformative learning. There are also some situations emphasized by the learning coaches that are not explicitly discussed by the learners and some important to the learners not addressed by learning coaches. The results are presented from the learner perspective and use the terminology from each separate study in describing the situations and conditions discussed. Results are discussed for each of the research questions and are followed by interpretation of these results.

Table 1. Research Question 1: Do the situations/conditions that learning coaches create with the intention of leading to transformative learning actually enable transformative learning from the perspective of participants?

Learner Perspective	Learning Coach Perspective
Individual Contextual Conditions Little or no experience in a learning area	Use of unfamiliar problems in unfamiliar contexts with non-expert participants
New awareness	Enables participant to critically reflect on self
Program Contextual Conditions Project teamwork including: • Continual action and reflection	Focus on cycle of reflection; action; reflection on action Enables participant to critically reflect on self Challenges the group
• Importance of project work	Program design emphasizes work on participant's or organization's real work
• Dialogue	Use of dialogue as one of the models when working with team
• Feedback	Provides feedback and enable participants to give and receive feedback from one another
Diversity	Program design emphasizes diversity of participants on team
Importance of practicing new behaviors	Transfer of learning
Feeling empathy when experiencing or seeing someone else experience emotions or feeling of exclusion/less than	Help participants to give and receive feedback to each other Help group to deal with emotions
Intensity, duration and frequency	Influence of time on work of learning coach
Open and trusting environment	Emphasis on confidentiality Work with an individual, but only within the team setting Create a supportive environment
Organizational Contextual Conditions Top management support	Influence of sponsors on work of learning coach

Although there is agreement in several areas, some agreement is stronger based on the number of learners and learning coaches who agreed. These stronger agreements are discussed below.

Individual Contextual Conditions

The key match in learner and learning coach perspectives within the individual context category is the importance of the learner having little to no experience in a learning area. All 22 of Lamm's learners discussed this condition. This condition was supported by the program design of having unfamiliar problems in unfamiliar contexts with non-expert participants on project teams. These design criteria were expressed as a basic part of action learning by almost all coaches in O'Neil's study including those not in the critical reflection school. This feeling of "not knowing" often fostered learners in trying on new points of view which Lamm (2000) defined as a new awareness. Prior to trying on this new point of view was what appeared to be a disorienting dilemma where learners realized that the way they originally viewed a situation/perspective might not be accurate or the best interpretation. Table 1a displays an example of this match:

Table 1a. Little or No Experience in a Learning Area

Learner Perspective	Learning Coach Perspective
(Before the program) I had a limited cross-function view…I was not aware how people working in other parts of the world looked upon us as a company…during the program, I realized other people looked upon things differently. (Back)	You might have in-company programmes where projects are undertaken in unfamiliar departments. … I'm in with the Reg (Revans) system here you know—beware of the experts. Beware of those who know, who've always got an answer. (Wendy)

Program Contextual Conditions

The first agreement in this area is continual action and reflection. All 22 of Lamm's learners and the 8 learning coaches in the critical reflection school in O'Neil's study described action and reflection as fostering transformative learning. The learners said that their learning coaches played a key role in this balance and the balance is considered an integral part of the ARL™ process. The coaches discussed using reflection—in Mezirow's language (1991) some described process reflection or content reflection—but always oriented towards creating situations for learning. These learning coaches also stressed the use of critical reflection to which the learners did not explicitly refer. This lack of reference to critical reflection may have been because the learners lacked the appropriate terminology; there was a lack of probing for critical reflection; or an issue involving adult development levels that will be discussed more in the conclusions section of the paper.

Table 1b. Continual Action and Reflection

Learner Perspective	Learning Coach Perspective
Because a lot of courses…they pass by, but this I think stuck in our minds…In this case it was repeatedly coming back to the same over emphasizing it…Did we do things right? What shall we do better? Making us almost angry how much...reflection…but if we hadn't done like that, it might have been that I wouldn't have remembered it. (Back)	But I'd certainly stay after and ask questions like questions you might agree to reflect and listen to. … How do you understand that Jean is interpreting our situation? Could you interpret it any differently? Alternative interpretations come to light that would drive people into more deep, you know, thinking about some things. I might do that sort of thing. (Pete)

The continual action and reflection is linked to the program condition of intensity, duration and frequency. As illustrated by Back in Table 1b, all subjects considered for this paper named this as an important condition in fostering transformative learning. Action learning programs have a variety of designs. When program sessions are spread over time, learners can try out new behaviors back in their lives, project work continues between program sessions and learning coaches are better able to create conditions to allow learning to happen. The action and

reflection balance is continuous throughout the program, which assists learners in making new behaviors that work a habit.

So the second are of substantial agreement is the intensity, duration and frequency of the program. All 22 of Lamm's learners and the 8 learning coaches in the critical reflection school in O'Neil's study discussed this phenomenon. The learners discussed how they could not escape the intensity of the program, with common mention of long hours and fatigue, but agreement about the value of a program of this duration. The coaches also discussed the issue from the opposite perspective. They expressed concern about the need to have sufficient time to effectively help people to engage in learning that could result in transformative learning. This difference in perspective can be attributed to the fact the coaches were engaged in a variety of program models—not all of which had the amounts of time they felt were sufficient for their work.

Table 1c. Intensity, Duration, and Frequency

Learner Perspective	Learning Coach Perspective
That's one of the good things this program has…It takes almost a year, so I mean, you get reminded. You get a new shot every three months…you get a chance to do something about what you learned, and implement it…One of the things we regret is that it has stopped. (Mike)	There's a mixed dilemma (with short programs) because if you wait until they really need it, it's the end of the program…My sense it it's not ideal in terms of timing. (Hillary)

The final area in Program Contextual Conditions is an open and trusting environment. Again, all subjects being considered for this paper in both studies agreed on this condition. The learners defined it as one where they felt safe to be honest and vulnerable and supported in their learning. Five of the learners specifically linked the learning coaches to creating an open and trusting environment. The coaches discussed norms such as confidentiality and setting boundaries between the action learning group and the organization and used words like collaborative, a 'context of grace', ethics and humane in characterizing the kind of environment they were trying to create. The kind of environment described by both the learners and coaches alike has a lot of resemblance to Mezirow's conditions of rational discourse (1991), which will be discussed more in the conclusions of the paper.

Table 1d. Open and Trusting Environment

Learner Perspective	Learning Coach Perspective
I felt secure also in the program. And if I hadn't…if I felt insecure, I think that would have blocked me from learning experiences. (Mike)	They interrogated him and told him in no uncertain terms that he had to go. … I just sat there rather quietly and said, 'well what are you going to do?'. … And my intervention seemed to create some sort of atmosphere which almost helped heal the thing. … There they were ready to see him off, and all of a sudden seeing this healing. I guess what I found interesting was that people do change if you're able to create the environment. (Ben)

Table 2. Research Question 2: Are there Situations/Conditions that Learning Coaches Create with the Intention of Leading to Transformative Learning that Participants don't Identify?

Learner Perspective	Learning Coach Perspective
Program Contextual Conditions	
No match	Use of questions
No match	Learning coach 'role metaphor' to say nothing and be invisible

Of the two Program Contextual Conditions explicitly identified by coaches and not learners, the most critical is the use of questions. Questions, or 'questioning insight', have always been considered a fundamental part of action learning (Revans, 1989; Weinstein, 1995). Learners also did not explicitly identify learning coaches as instrumental in their transformative learning. These non-matches could be attributed to the fact that both questions and coaches are such an integral part of the action learning process they became 'invisible'. The earlier quote by Back alludes to questions being asked repeatedly during the reflection process and in O'Neil's findings many of the learning coaches tried to attain the role of "saying nothing and being invisible".

Table 3. Research Question 3: Are there Situations/Conditions Participants Say Bring About Transformative Learning that Learning Coaches don't Explicitly Identify?

Learner Perspective	Learning Coach Perspective
Program Contextual Conditions	
Informal time	No match
Organizational contextual conditions	
Supportive organizational context	No match
Job change	No match
Supportive boss/co-workers	No match

There was one Program Contextual Condition and three Organizational Contextual Conditions that learners identified as helping to foster transformative learning while learning coaches did not. The program condition mentioned by 11 learners was how Informal time such as drinking at the bar, eating, and traveling together fostered transformative learning. As one learner said, "you would have to be deaf, dumb and blind not to pick up something after spending so much time together – eating and traveling together." This finding confirms literature on the importance of informal learning (Marsick & Watkins, 1992). Learning coaches may not have mentioned informal time as a condition because, while it is part of the program design, it is not an activity that coaches purposefully engage in.

The Organizational Contextual Conditions described by learners as important in fostering transformative learning but not by learning coaches were Supportive organizational context, Job change around the time of the program, and Supportive boss/co-workers. These organizational conditions were often mentioned as important in continuing to apply new behaviors and try on new points of view back in the workplace. There are a few possible explanations for the learner/learning coach discrepancy around Organizational Contextual Conditions. First, as described in the limitation section above, learning coaches were from varied backgrounds and worked across several organizations, while the learners were within one organization. Second, a learning coach's view is often more within the context of the program since their role is within an action learning program.

Conclusions and Recommendations

There is a significant amount of agreement between the two studies on the conditions that can help to enable transformative learning. Both the major areas of agreement in the individual and program context, and the main area of disagreement, the organizational context, can be attributed to a number of reasons as discussed in the preceding section.

There are two areas of results from this study, however, that have a particular relationship to Mezirow's work on transformative learning. The first is in the finding of the agreement of a need for an open and trusting environment and the second is the issue of the coaches advocating the use of critical reflection to enable transformative learning versus the learners not explicitly identifying critical reflection as a part of their transformative process.

The finding of the need for an open and trusting environment would appear to confirm Mezirow's ideal conditions where learners are able to feel safe to share openly (1991).

"Under these optimal conditions, participants will:

- have accurate and complete information
- be free from coercion and distorting self-deception
- be able to weigh evidence and assess arguments objectively
- be open to alternative perspectives
- be able to become critically reflective upon presuppositions and their consequences
- have equal opportunity to participate (including the chance to challenge, question, refute, and reflect and to hear others do the same), and
- be able to accept an informed, objective, and rational consensus a legitimate test of validity" (po. 77-78).

For example, Mezirow talks about an environment in which learners are free from coercion and open to alternative perspectives. One learner said, "I felt secure in the program. ...if I felt insecure, I think that would have blocked me from learning experiences". A learning coach described an intervention, "And my intervention seemed to create some sort of atmosphere which almost helped heal the thing". Both described action learning programs that seemed to create these ideal conditions.

Addressing the second issue, Mezirow theorizes that critical reflection is needed for transformative learning (1991). The learning coaches from the critical reflection school would agree with him. Why then didn't the learners, who experienced transformative learning, identify critical reflection as one of the conditions? Two reasons were discussed earlier—the learners did not have the language to describe what could be interpreted as critical reflection or the research didn't probe for critical reflection. Another view might be that these learners didn't experience critical reflection. Fisher and Torbert (1995) theorize that critical reflection and transformative learning can only take place with people who are at a high developmental level. Perhaps people who are at different developmental levels experience transformative learning differently. Mezirow and Lamm (1997) agreed that absent chance occurrence of a traumatic event, cumulative transformations seem most likely fostered in an action learning program. In this case the learners might have experienced a series of single loop learning cycles that resulted in a cumulative transformative learning experience (Lamm, 2000). So while learning coaches may be trying to create situations for critical reflection, many learners may be in "over their heads" (Kegan, 1994) from a developmental perspective.

More research is necessary to examine the issue of how the developmental level of learners may impact their transformative learning experience. A study could be set up with the specific objective of comparing learning coach and learner perspectives. The conditions suggested in this paper could be used to test whether similar conditions are found in other context s while at the same time allowing for new emerging conditions. Perhaps using a methodology like mixed focus groups of learning coaches and learners could foster a live dialog around such condition comparisons. Such research could also identify possible exp lanations for discrepancies in learning coach and learner viewpoints.

How this Research Contributes to New Knowledge in HRD

This paper presents a unique look at research that combines findings from two exiting studies to produce a new set of findings. These findings add to the theory base of both action learning and transformative learning, as well as provide knowledge useful to learning coach practitioners. Finally, the paper opens new avenues for research, particularly in the area of transformative leaming.

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